

Case study - Westminster Council (Parking Services)

Sector: Public Sector

Type of organisation: Parking Services

In 2007 Westminster Council (www.westminster.gov.uk) first looked at the possibility of introducing cashless parking across the borough. With 4,500 individual parking meters and 750 pay & display parking machines, the council had much ageing equipment and the associated costs of replacement and on-going maintenance. This was not the only challenge faced by the parking services division. Over £6 million per year was estimated as being stolen from meters through organised crime. As a result, the council decided to assess the viability of a 'pay by phone' scheme that would eliminate both the problems of cash collection and theft and provide some important customer benefits and in addition, reduce much unwanted street clutter.

Challenge:

The Council needed a solution that could reduce the reliance on individual parking meters as well as provide them with vital management information that would help them to plan for future use of facilities.

Director of Parking at Westminster, Alastair Gilchrist explains, *"We were looking for a convenient method of payment for the general public that would not only eradicate the potential crime threat but would also give us statistics on the usage of particular parking areas. For example if a parking spot is getting next to no usage, then the space could be used for something else more valuable to the community. We previously obtained this information through surveys but these proved both time-consuming, inaccurate and costly."*

The council decided that a 'pay by phone' solution would be feasible taking into account that roughly 95% of the population now own a mobile phone and also possess a credit or debit card. To set up cashless parking the council needed a technology provider that could set up the necessary infrastructure to make this work and the services of an outsourced contact centre responsible for handling the initial registration and associated customer service enquiries.

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The Solution:

Westminster chose pay-by-phone technology specialist Verrus who was responsible for North America's first pay by phone parking installation in 2001, together with its outsourced contact centre partner in the UK, Converso. The council has a long history of using outsourcing and recognises the benefits of drawing on expertise and resources that may not be available internally.

Westminster's 'pay by phone' service is now a straightforward process involving a mixture of both automated technology and talking to a person on the phone. The cost of the call from the customer has recently been reduced with Westminster introducing a local number, 0207 005 0055, instead of the former 0870 line. The caller's phone number is captured using CLI (call line identification) and then an IVR (interactive voice response) system enables them to input their credit card details. The call is then automatically transferred to Converso and, because IVR is employed for this part, there is additional security so that the call centre agent can only see the last 4 digits of the credit card number.

The agent then asks the caller for their vehicle registration which they enter into the Verrus web-based system. At this stage, the caller can also then opt for additional services such as text messaging when parking is due to expire etc. They can also request to be sent an e-mail with a receipt. Once registered, individuals can then park by phone using touchtone IVR (interactive voice response), by text or even via the web. If an individual wants to extend their parking time, they do not have to return to their vehicle but instead can simply text a number with the parking location number and the extra minutes they require.

The new 'pay by phone' system also makes it easier for Civil Enforcement Officers (previously known as Parking Attendants) to monitor the borough of Westminster which covers approximately 8 square miles. By using PDAs (personal digital assistants) with GPRS (enables web access), they can put in the number of the location or the individual vehicle registration number and can then view on screen which vehicles have paid, allowing them to issue Penalty Notices or on the spot fines to those that are illegally parked.

Callers who have general parking enquiries in Westminster can also have these answered by Converso when they call. This reduces the need to hand off a call to Westminster's general parking enquiry line.

Converso has trained approximately 100 of its staff on the service, some dedicated and some from its bureau division. All have direct access to Westminster's extranet where they can find all the necessary information on any parking queries. Prior to the campaign starting, all of Converso's staff were given training and were then set a quiz to test both their knowledge and their ability to search Westminster's site quickly for appropriate information.

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Alastair Gilchrist explains, *"We thought this would be a fun way for advisors to learn and all those that took part obtained very high scores. What we liked about Converso was their positive attitude. They picked everything up really quickly and also due to their obvious extensive customer service skills background, provided some valuable feedback and ways in which we might improve the service in terms of the type and order of questions asked. I have visited Converso's offices several times and have made a number of test calls to them and always been impressed by their professionalism and their helpful manner on the phone."*

Westminster receives weekly reports from Converso on statistics such as number of calls, average handling times, abandoned calls and so on. In addition, if a more urgent issue arises this is reported in real-time.

Results:

Alastair Gilchrist explains, *"We felt that the whole process could not be completely automated because people still want the comfort and reassurance of speaking to a live person. By using the blend of technology from Verrus with the customer service skills of Converso we have the perfect solution to introducing a service that is being readily adopted by the general public. Since introducing payment by phone we have undertaken a number of consumer surveys, and have been supported in this by Converso making outbound calls, and had very favourable feedback. Over two thirds of the sample was satisfied with the new service and almost 75% felt that the clarity of instructions from customer advisers was very easy. Surprisingly there was greatest acceptance in the 65+ age group with 100% satisfaction and in younger age groups (17-25 year olds) where 92% said they were pleased with the service."* Of those surveyed 58% were parking for business purposes and 18% for sightseeing.

"The beauty of this system is that we have set up a Partners in Parking (PiP) Framework agreement which will enable other members of the consortium to use the same services from Verrus and Converso. This makes it more affordable because they are taking advantage of the economies of scale that such a partnership provides. For example 80,000 transactions per week might be handled for Westminster, whilst another council might only do 1,000." It is also possible for registered users in Westminster to use the service in other parts of the country where Verrus operates.

All of Westminster's 8,500 parking bays are now enabled for pay-by-phone parking and it expects that by March 2009 it will have physically removed the remaining 2,000 meters and cash-taking pay and display machines from the streets.

Alastair Gilchrist reports on the savings made, *"Over the last 18 months, Westminster Council has saved well over £6million alone by preventing cash being stolen from meters. By using the Verrus/Converso partnership we can also eliminate the significant cost of cash collection and routine maintenance of machines. The pay by phone service is a perfect example*

of how you can use a balanced mix of both technology and human interaction to provide a convenient, fast, popular and extremely cost-effective method for large scale payments."

Converso Contact Centres won the 'Best Call Centre Campaign in the Public sector, inbound or outbound' in the Connect 2008 Awards based on the above case study (www.connectawards.com)

